

Care for Common Viruses



Nurse Aide Education Program

Inservice/Continuing Education Credit Courses

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Introduction

Almost everyone gets sick at some point. The elderly, very young and those with chronic diseases are more vulnerable to illnesses. There are special precautions that can be taken to reduce the risk of becoming ill. But, if a person does become ill, there are steps that can be taken to help make the person more comfortable.

Viruses

Most common illnesses are viruses which are easily passed from person to person. Viruses can live on the surface of objects for a period of time. When secretions from an ill person get on objects that others touch those who touch the object may transfer the virus to their own nose or mouth, thus "catching" the virus. Symptoms may not appear for a few days. Antibiotics will not kill viruses. Generally a virus has to "run its course" meaning the body needs to fight off the virus on its own. That can take a few days or may take a couple of weeks.



Hand Washing

The best defense against catching a virus is thorough hand washing. People who are ill or caring for someone who is ill should be extra sure to wash their hands. Hands should be washed before preparing food and eating, after using the bathroom and after helping with personal care. Thorough hand washing is more than running water over the hands. Soap, water and friction are needed.

Here are the proper steps to follow.

1. Turn on the faucet and adjust the water to a comfortable temperature.
2. Completely wet your hands and wrists under the running water. Try to keep your fingers and hands below your elbow to keep water from running on your arms.
3. Apply soap to your hands.
4. Lather your hands well by rubbing the palms together. Spread lather over the entire area of your hands, between the fingers, under your nails and over the wrists.
5. Continue lathering and rubbing for at least 30 seconds.
6. Rinse the soapy lather from your hands.



7. Dry your hands and wrists thoroughly with a paper towel.
8. Using a clean paper towel between your hand and the handle, turn the faucet off. Discard the towels.

If the skin on your hands becomes dry, apply lotion after washing. Don't skip washing your hands to try to prevent the skin from getting dry.

Cleaning

Keeping the bathroom, kitchen and dishes clean is important at all times, but especially when there is an ill person in the home. If your patient or anyone living with your patient has a virus, take extra time to clean carefully and thoroughly.

Here are some tips.

- Use disinfecting cleaning solution to clean hard surfaces.
- Vacuum thoroughly.
- Change bed linens at least weekly. This may need to be done more frequently when the person is ill.
- Wash bed linens and towels in hot water.
- Wash dishes in hot water or use a dishwasher.
- Throw away used tissues as soon after use as possible. Ask your patient to put used ones directly into a bag that can be thrown away without caregivers touching the contents.



Respiratory Infections (Colds)

Respiratory illnesses are often referred to as a "cold". Symptoms vary but may include any or all of these:

- Nasal symptoms such as sneezing, runny or stuffy nose
- Ear ache
- Sore throat
- Cough
- Fever
- Fatigue
- Headache
- Laryngitis (loss of voice)



A cold generally lasts 7 to 14 days. There is no cure for the common cold. Although there are many cold "remedies" on the market, none will cure the person of a cold. These medicines reduce or cover up the symptoms until the body can fight off the virus. There are things that you can do to help your patient feel better.



One common thread among many of the symptoms is an excess of nasal drainage. The drainage may come out the nose in the form of sneezing or just a steady flow. Or the drainage may settle in the nasal passages and drip in the back of the throat. This can lead to a stuffy nose, sore throat, headache and possibly laryngitis. Ear aches can be very painful. This is a result of the tubes in the ears getting blocked causing fluid to build up behind the ear drum, putting pressure on the drum. Not all ear aches are ear infections that require antibiotics. Most ear aches will resolve with no medication other than acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) for the pain.

Coughs may be a result of excessive drainage down the back of the throat or from congestion in the lungs. Both of these also can cause the throat to feel sore.

One of the best ways to counteract this excess fluid is more fluid. That sounds backwards but it's true. The excess nasal drainage tends to be thick and sticky. Drinking extra fluids can help thin these secretions. Thinned secretions are less likely to clog or get stuck in the nasal passages and lungs. But, some fluids are better than others and some should be avoided when ill. Dairy products, such as milk, ice cream, yogurt and cheese and citrus juices (orange, grapefruit, etc.) tend to cause more secretions and don't help thin the secretions that are there. Caffeine drinks and alcohol tend to pull fluid from the body, making the secretions thicker. Examples of caffeine drinks include coffee, tea, cola drinks, Mt. Dew, energy drinks, and chocolate. So what should your patient drink? Water is best. Warm drinks like broth add fluid as well as help loosen the thickened secretions.



Fever is generally harmless and in most cases does not need to be treated. It's an indication that the body is fighting the virus. Unless the fever is higher than 101°F, most doctors will recommend nothing be done.

Treatments for colds

There are things a home health aide can do to help care for someone who has a cold.



- Encourage your patient to blow their nose often and the right way. The best way to blow the nose is to press a finger over one nostril while gently blowing to clear the other.
- Help your patient get plenty of rest. Rest helps the body direct its energies toward fighting the virus.



- Gargling with different solutions can help a variety of different throat problems.

- For a sore throat, mix ½ to 1 teaspoon of table salt in a full glass of warm water four times a day. This will help moisten and soothe the throat.
- For a tickle in the throat, try warm tea. Or use a thick gargle made with honey or a mixture of honey and apple cider vinegar. Honey should never be given to children less than one year old.



- Hot liquids relieve nasal congestion, help prevent dehydration and soothe the nose and throat. Chicken soup has long been used to combat colds and it does actually help. It has anti-inflammatory properties as well as being a flavorful hot liquid to drink.

- Saline nasal drops and sprays help reduce congestion in the nose and sinuses. These can be bought over the counter. Follow the directions on the box.

- Increase the humidity in the room. If your patient does not have a humidifier or vaporizer, place a pan of water over a heating register. You can also place a tea kettle or pan of water over a low burner on the stove, but you need to stay in the room. Don't let the pan or kettle boil dry.



- Steamy showers moisten the nasal passages and help relax the patient. Have the patient sit on the toilet or a chair and close the bathroom door while the hot shower water runs, steaming the bathroom.
- Add an extra pillow behind the neck and shoulders so gravity can help drain the nasal passages.

Nausea, Vomiting and Diarrhea

Viruses can also cause gastrointestinal (GI) illnesses that result in nausea, vomiting and/or diarrhea. As with colds, antibiotics will not cure the virus. Treatment is geared toward relieving the symptoms.



Treatments for GI viruses

With vomiting and diarrhea, fluids are lost which can quickly lead to dehydration. This is particularly true for the elderly and infants. It is important to replace the lost fluid and also to slow or stop the loss of fluid. When caring for a person who has a GI virus, watch for signs of dehydration. These include:

- Dry cracked lips
- Dry mouth and mucus membranes
- Decreased or no urine output
- Increased thirst
- Very dark urine

- Lack of tears
- Skin that does not spring back after you gently pinch it up.

If your patient shows signs of dehydration and cannot keep fluids down, contact the nurse or a family member or call 911. Intravenous fluids may be needed.

Keep track of the frequency of the vomiting/diarrhea episodes. The nurse, doctor or paramedics will need to know this if medical attention is needed. Also, watch for blood. If you ever see blood in the emesis, urine or stools, seek medical attention.

When your patient is nauseated, limit their intake to bland, light foods. This may prevent vomiting. Avoid greasy and fried foods. Encourage the patient to sip on clear liquids slowly rather than drink a large amount quickly. A clear liquid is one you can see through, such as apple juice, gelatin, water, weak decaffeinated tea, or broth. Popsicles are also considered a clear liquid and usually are well tolerated. If your patient is unable to keep anything down, wait a few hours before trying again. Then, start with just sips of a clear liquid or let ice chips slowly melt in the mouth. As long as there is no vomiting, gradually increase the amount and/or shorten the time between drinks.



Diarrhea is frequent, loose and watery stools (bowel movements). Diarrhea contains water, salt and minerals needed by the body and can quickly lead to dehydration. There is generally an urgency to use the bathroom and it is not uncommon for the person to soil themselves.

Adjusting the diet is one of the best ways to treat diarrhea. When diarrhea first starts, it's best to eat and drink nothing, giving the GI system a chance to fight the virus and rest. To help prevent dehydration, restart food intake with clear liquids such as fruit juices, sports drinks, sodas or tea without caffeine, broths, popsicles, and gelatin. If the patient tolerates the clear liquids, try adding some bland foods such as bananas, plain rice, toast, or crackers. Dairy products also help "bind" the stool. Yogurts with active, live bacterial cultures are especially helpful.

If your patient has diabetes, consult with the nurse or family members for help with the diet. You may need to alternate between sugar free drinks and regular drinks. Help your patient check their blood sugar often when they are ill. Watch for signs of low blood sugar. If the blood sugar is low and the patient is not able to drink and eat, call 911 for medical assistance. With these types of acute illnesses, someone with diabetes may experience very high blood sugars, even if they are not eating large amounts. Untreated, this can result in a potentially life threatening condition called Diabetic Keto-Acidosis, or DKA. If your patient's blood sugar is unusually high, contact the nurse or family member or help the patient contact the doctor. The doctor may order an extra dose of insulin. If you are not able to get help from any of these people or you notice that the patient's breath smells sweet and fruity, call 911. Your patient needs immediate medical attention.

Comfort Measures

In addition to altering your patient's diet, don't forget their other needs. Although they should rest, a bath or shower can make them feel much better. If they can't tolerate getting into the tub or shower, give them a bed bath. Be sure to carefully clean and dry their skin after each bowel movement or emesis, particularly if they soil themselves. Wash and change the bed linens and their clothes making sure they are never laying or sitting in soiled garments.

Reporting

The nurse and/or family should be notified immediately if any of the following are observed. If no one is available to follow up, the aide should call 911 to have the person evaluated by paramedics and possibly transported to the emergency room.

- Blood in urine, vomit, stool or sputum (mucus coughed up)
- Difficult to wake up
- Confused
- Dry cracked lips and mouth and no urine output
- Fever greater than 101°F



Summary

Most common illnesses are viruses which can make a person feel miserable for anywhere from a few days to a couple of weeks. Good hand washing is the best defense against transmitting a virus. Antibiotics will not kill viruses. Generally a virus has to "run its course" meaning the body needs to fight off the virus on its own. This course has described several things a home health aide can do to help a person be more comfortable as they recover from the illness. It's important for the aide to keep the nurse and/or family updated on the person's progress during this recovery period and to summon help if the patient appears to be getting worse.

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